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CIA Directly Oversaw Attack in October on Nicaragua Oil Facility

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CIA officers aboard a "mother ship" off the coast of Nicaragua directly supervised commando raids from speedboats that heavily damaged Nicaraguan port facilities last fall, months before they supervised the controversial mining of the country's harbors in January, administration and congressional sources said yesterday.

The CIA leased the ship last summer, according to the sources, and American agents aboard it furnished the speedboats, guns and ammunition and directed the raid by anti-government rebels in the port city of Corinto last Oct. 10. The CIA officers stayed on the ship in international waters beyond the 12-mile limit, while CIA-trained Latin commandos piloted the speedboats into the harbor and shot up an oil terminal, the sources said.

The raid heavily damaged oil storage tanks and forced thousands of inhabitants to flee. At the time, the Nicaraguan government charged that the "criminal attack" was part of a CIA plan, but the U.S.-supported "contras" of the Honduras-based Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN) claimed credit for the raid.

A senior White House official confirmed that CIA agents supervised the attack, saying their role was necessary because "they [CIA officers] had the speedboats."

The Associated Press quoted a source as saying the CIA had directed a series of such raids on Nicaraguan ports, including one on oil and pipeline facilities at Puerto Sandino on Sept. 8.

A CIA spokesman declined to comment yesterday, except to say that Congress had been informed of its covert operations as required by the intelligence oversight laws.

But, as in the case of the mining, congressional sources said the House and Senate intelligence committees were not told of the direct involvement of Americans in the port raids until recently.

CIA Director William J. Casey already is under fire from congressmen for his alleged lack of candor in informing intelligence committees of the details of the Reagan administration's supposedly secret war against Nicaragua. That controversy has threatened congressional support for continued funding of the rebels fighting Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista government.

One congressional source said staff members of the House intelligence committee first "got wind of the mother ship about mid-October," but didn't get a full briefing on either the ship's role in the raid or the mining until Jan. 31 and then only after persistent questioning from members.

But another source said that some House committee members didn't know until yesterday that the CIA had directed the raid, as well as the mining.

"We were directed," he said. "They

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led us to believe it was the contras, but as it turns out it was CIA personnel on the mother ship, directing the operations, picking the targets and the whole business."

A Senate committee source said the agency had told the committee in general terms last summer that it was training the anti-Sandinista forces in laying mines, but not that Americans would be directly supervising their actions. "When you get agency officers directly involved, that's really a high-stakes game," he said.

The Senate committee staff learned about the U.S.-directed raids from House staffers and then began asking questions on the "mother ship" at an April 2 briefing, one source said.

A few days earlier, in answer to a query about mining by Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), the ranking minority member of the Foreign Relations Committee, the CIA's legislative liaison, Clair George, sent minority staff director Gary J. Schmitt a two-sentence letter that said "unilaterally controlled Latino assets" were involved.

The April 2 Senate briefing with Casey "was so heated," a committee source said, that full answers on the role of the CIA officers on the "mother ship" were never received. "We still don't know when it was acquired how many CIA officers were involved in many of the details," a Senate committee

staff aide said. Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), a member of the committee who has supported funding for the "covert" war but has been a harsh critic of Casey's trustworthiness, said in a telephone interview that he had not been informed about the CIA's role in the port raids last fall.

"I don't know if I would have thought it was the same as the indiscriminate nature of the mining," he said. But he added, "What bothers me the most is that I don't know we've had the opportunity to even draw the line between direct control and indirect control" of covert operations.

"The best thing the agency could do is tell us all about their covert operations. They'd get a sense of how the 16 of us [members of the intelligence committee] view their actions. We're their sounding board. If we're together and are told about this, we can't bitch. It would be in their best interest to insist on regular briefings so we'd be so bored we'd stop going."

In a statement defending its actions in informing the intelligence committees, CIA spokesman George Lauder said Monday that "The obligation to keep the committees fully informed has, as it has evolved in practice, been met by briefings of the staff, responding to their oral and written questions, and by providing updates on developments and answering any and all questions at meetings called by the committees."

Robert R. Simmons, the staff director of the Senate committee and a former officer in the CIA's clandestine service, said in a telephone interview yesterday that the law requiring the committees be "fully informed" called for more than answering if the right questions were asked.

He said the provision of full information to the two intelligence committees had been a tradeoff for allowing the agency to cease its reporting of sensitive operations to six other congressional committees.

"What Casey and his adviser [George] are doing, in taking this stand, is precipitating a crisis that may lead the CIA back to briefing eight committees . . . It's putting the agency back where it was five years ago," Simmons said.

He noted that the CIA's legislative liaison, George, was a 30-year veteran of the agency's covert branch and "has the same mindset as Casey," a veteran of secret operations in World War II. "That match is a prescription for disaster," he said.

Staff writers Lou Cannon and Joanne Omang contributed to this report.